DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 003 HE 014 621

AUTHOR Michael, Robert O.; Barbe, Richard H.
TITLE The Practice-Theory-Practice Model: The Establishment of the Theoretical Bases of a Case Study.
PUB DATE 29 Oct 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Joint Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research and the North Carolina Association for Institutional Research (Charlotte, NC, October 29, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Case Studies; Change Strategies; *College Administration; College Environment; *College Planning; Decision Making; *Educational Change; Educational History; Educational Practices; Educational Trends; Higher Education; *Institutional Research; Models; *Organizational Theories; Policy Formation; Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

The Practice-Theory-Practice Model (PTPM), a method designed to infuse theoretical perspectives into case study materials and to serve as a guide for examining change processes in institutions of higher education, is described. The PTPM considers the historical and experiential environment that acts upon an institution, its practices and its actors. The model shows the historical-experiential perspective to be an examination of the forces acting to reinforce and maintain a particular practice. Normative and systemic knowledge are seen as flowing from a study of this practice and comprise the major bodies of knowledge surrounding this current practice. The PTPM also requires careful analysis of research decisions and planning-based decisions made as they pertain to the practice. These knowledge and decision analyses produce the information necessary for the study of the interactions among the different types of knowledge, and between the actors and the knowledge from a practice. The PTPM establishes the valuation process as the mediation point for these actions. Thus the PTPM provides a method not only for studying the components of an institutional change, but also for analyzing the component interactions that lead to reinforced or altered practice. The application of the practice-theory-practice model as a guide for the study of institutional change can be either reconstructive or predictive. The PTPM provides a theoretical outline of the institutional change process and also gives an enriched method for studying such changes. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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THE PRACTICE-THEORY-PRACTICE MODEL:

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE THEORETICAL BASES OF A CASE STUDY

Paper prepared for presentation at the joint conference of the
Southern Association for Institutional Research and the
North Carolina Association for Institutional Research

October 29, 1981

Charlotte, North Carolina

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Robert O. Michael
Administrative Specialist
Georgia Career Information System
University Plaza
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
(404) 658-3100

Richard H. Barbe
Professor, Department of Educational Administration
Georgia State University
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
(404) 658-2529

HE 014 621

The case study method has proved to be an execellent way to cataloguing the actors and events in a change process. Often reported in a chronological format, the case study is the product of intensive institutional research which is generally of value to the research site. When viewed by a broader range of students of higher education, however, the case study often provides little information of use to a more general understanding of institutional change (Scriven, 1978; Lincoln and Guba, 1980). The problem with the external applicability of case study materials stems not from poor research procedures or from improper topical focus; the problem inherent in the case study method, when it is used to examine institutional change in higher education, is its lack of theoretical foundation.

The understanding of institutional change in higher education can be expanded with the establishment and utilization of a theoretical foundation upon which to formulate its study. This base serves as a link between the existing practice being studied and the changed practice which results. The Practice-Theory-Practice Model (PTPM) presented in this paper is designed to serve both as a method for infusing theoretical perspectives into case study materials and as a guide for examining change processes in institutions of higher education.

Organizational theory is postulated upon the influence of environmental forces on organizations. Katz and Kahn (1978), Hage (1980), and Meyer (1977) all emphasize the role which social, political and economic forces play in the health and growth of organizations. Institutions of higher education are most certainly subject to--and often in a heightened sense--such environmental forces.

In the PTPM these forces combine to make up the historical-experiential environment which acts upon an institution, its practices and its actors. Since these forces pervade the change process, they are depicted in the Model (Figure 1, #1) as the support for the ertire change process.

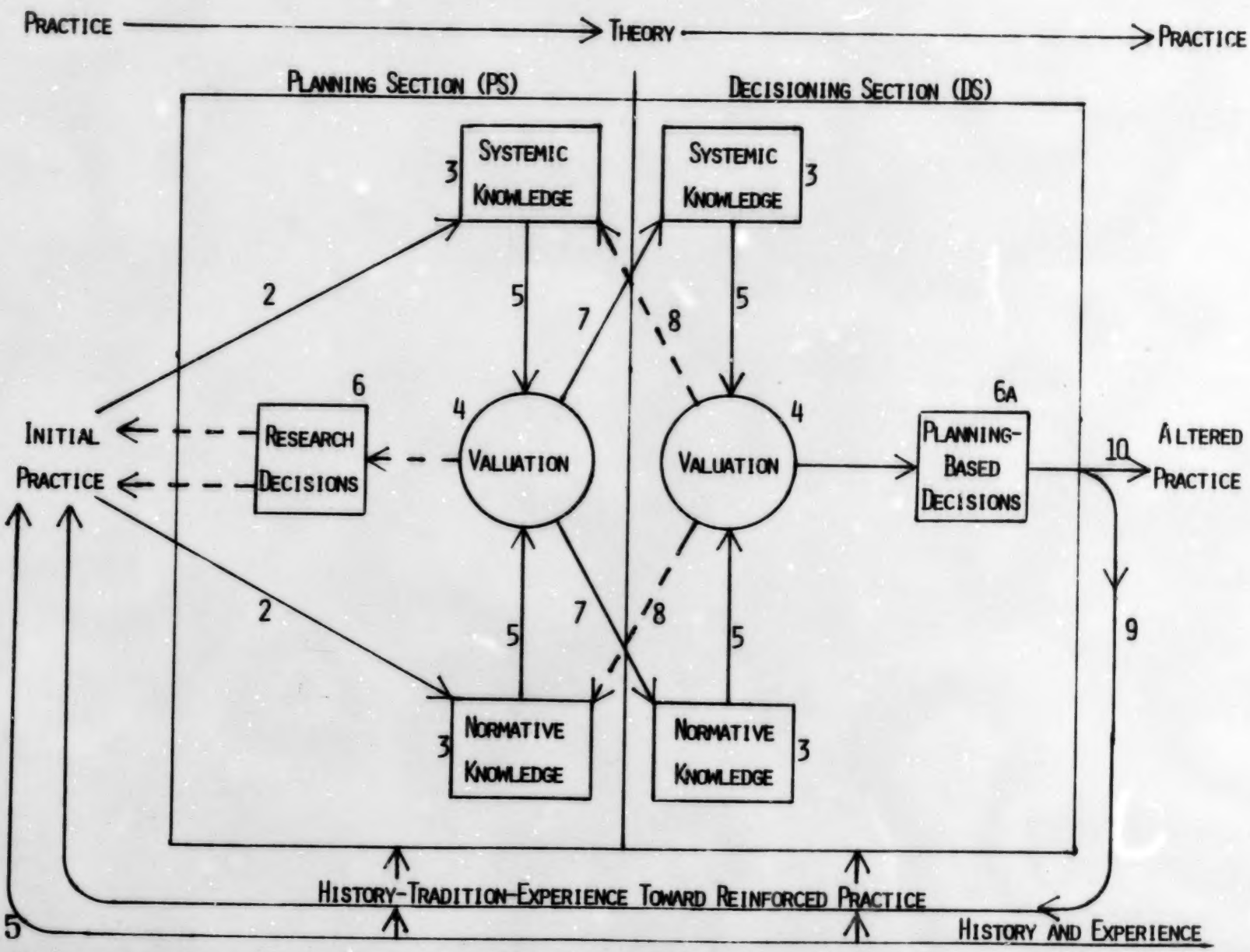
Any practice of an institution can be examined through an historical-experiential, normative, or systemic perspective or knowledge base.

The Practice-Theory-Practice Model shows the historical-experiential perspective to be an examination of the forces acting to reinforce and maintain a particular practice. Normative and systemic knowledge are seen as flowing from a study of this practice and comprise the major bodies of knowledge surrounding this current practice (Figure 1, #2). While it appears that the historical-experiential knowledge pertaining to a practice does not flow directly from the practice itself, this knowledge surrounds, supports and presses the practice. This, in turn, influences the sources, structures and contents of the normative and systemic knowledge which can be developed about the practice (Kuhn, 1970; Fleck, 1935/1979). Normative knowledge describes the current practice and is generated through census data, surveys, taxonomies or correlational studies. Generated through experimentation or theoriration, systemic knowledge interacts with normative knowledge to form an explanation of the current practice or its components.

As an individual or a group of people within an institution determine the need to examine a specific practice, there is movement in the PTPM from the initial practice to the theory stage.

FIGURE 1

THE PRACTICE-THEORY-PRACTICE MODEL



This has two major divisions: Planning and Decisioning. Generally, in higher education, institutional planning represents the Planning Section (PS) of the theory component, and the central administration is the Decisioning Section (DS). Both of these units have normative and systemic in-flow components (Figure 1, #3) providing the major types of knowledge surrounding and emanating from the practice. (See Smith, 1980, and others for more on the techniques for disseminating this knowledge).

While these information bases are mutually supportive and interactive, they are separated in the PS and in the DS by a Valuation Process (VP - Figure 1, #4). This separation is actually a mediation which occurs when an individual or a group of people within an institution internally examines both normative and systemic information and analyzes and evaluates it according to personal value structures based upon a priori knowledge.

The Valuation Process, while running counter to pleas for a value-free science of administration (see Foster, 1980, for further explication of this), is a pivotal component in the PTPM. It is the mediation point through which normative and systemic knowledge interact. The results of this interaction form the bases for explanations and questions pertaining to a practice and its reinforcement or alteration.

The location of the Valuation Process as the mediation point between normative and systemic knowledge is graphically shown in the Model by the movement of the arrows flowing from these knowledge components toward the VP (Figure 1, #5). The VP occurs not only

within the separate PS and DS, but it also arises during the interactions between the two sections. Throughout these interactions a valuation process and exchange takes place which affects all subsequent actions.

The illustrated "shoehorning" of a wide range of knowledge into three simple categories--social, political and economic--may appear to be intellectually presumptuous. It does, however, allow for two main operations in the PTPM.

First, viewing knowledge as having social, political and economic elements provides a way to simplify and manage the vast amount of information which surrounds and emerges from a practice and which flows into the Valuation Process. This social, political and economic knowledge is utilized in the VP, upon which Research and Planning-Based decisions pertaining to the practice are based (Figure 1, #6, #6a).

The second operation permitted by the use of social, political and economic categories is the solid movement toward identifying those researchable value components which are used in analyzing and acting upon normative and systemic information in the PS and DS.

The Practice-Theory-Practice Model holds that these social, political and economic bits of contemporary information are compared with the PS's and DS's social, political and economic components of their own a priori knowledge bases. The Valuation Process, then, is a comparison of these contemporary bits of knowledge with an a priori knowledge base, a value scheme, consisting of the same three categories.

The VP comparison of the three categories of contemporary information consists of two simultaneous actions: Ranging and Balancing.

Ranging (Figure 2) is the placement of contemporary and a priori normative and systemic information onto an ideological continuum for each of the social, political and economic categories. Each continuum runs from conservative (scale value of 1) to dynamic (scale value of 10). Once the ranges have been established by the valuating section, the contemporary and a priori scales are compared by the valuating section. This Ranging action, the comparison process and its results, constitutes one action step in the VP.

Balancing (Figure 3), the other action step in the VP, is the process of assigning importance to each information category in relation to the other two categories. This weighted importance may be for the strength of the information in relation to the other information contained in the remaining categories, or it may be for the sheer bulk of a category's information in comparison with the other dimensions. Each contemporary and a priori information category is given a minimum weight of 1 and a maximum weight of 7, with a total numerical value of 9 for contemporary knowledge and for a priori knowledge. In the Balancing action the numerical balance of the contemporary social, political and economic categories of the normative and systemic information is compared by the valuating section with the numerical balance among the same three categories in the a priori dimension. As the Balancing process takes place, the greater the similarity between the weights assigned the contemporary and the a priori knowledge categories, the greater

FIGURE 2

RANGING

VALUATION ACTION #1

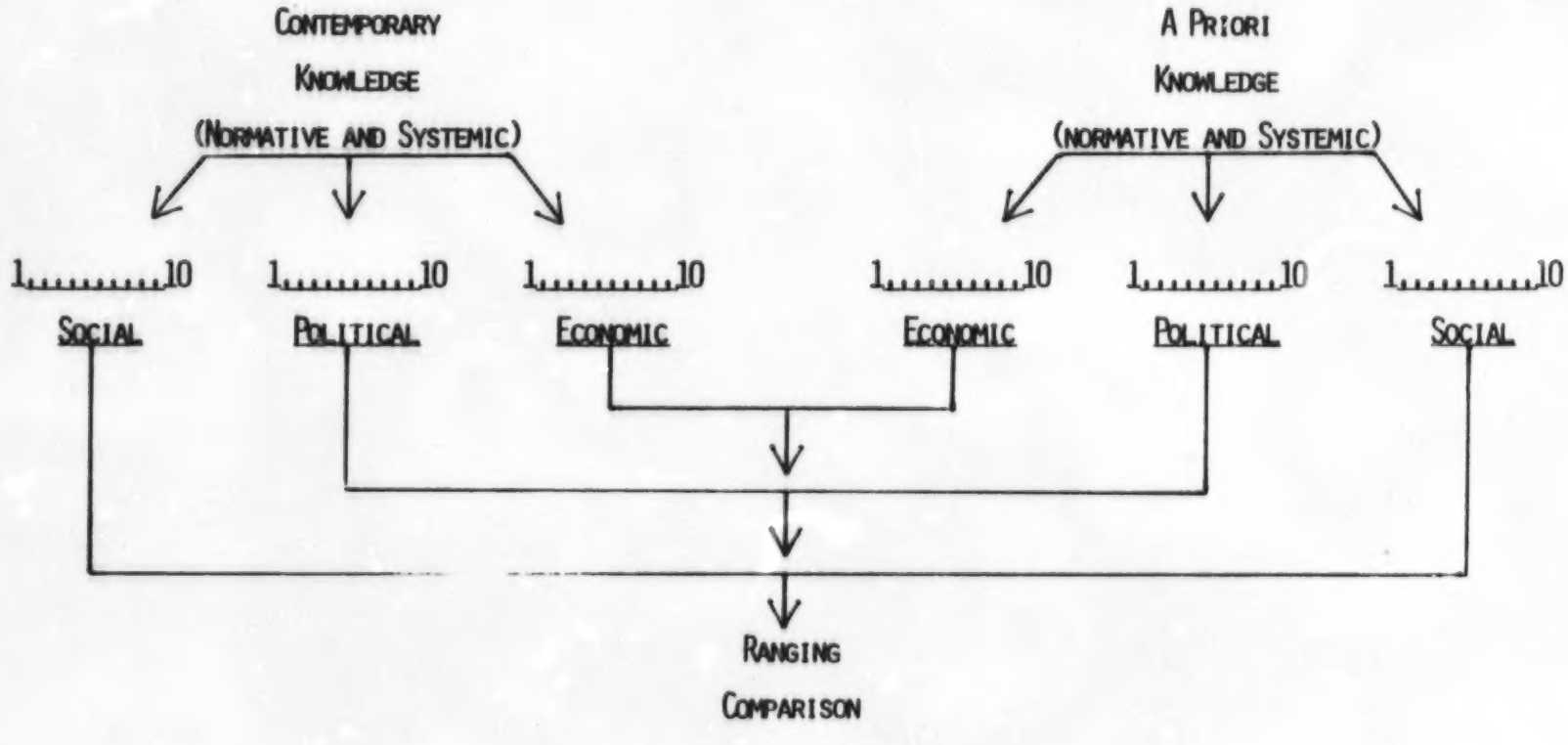


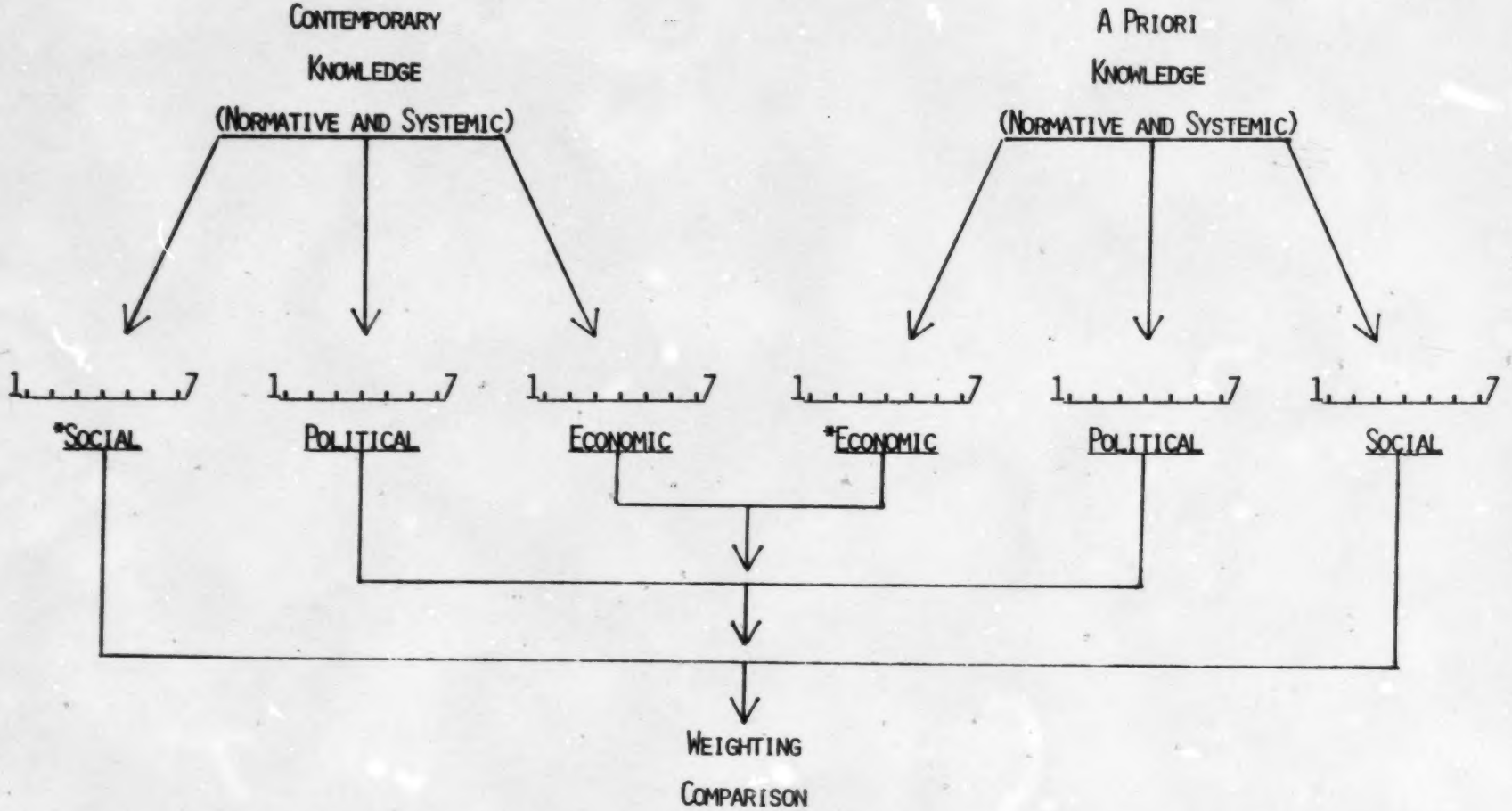
FIGURE 2A

IDEOLOGICAL CONTINUUM

FIGURE 3

BALANCING

VALUATION ACTION #2



*SOCIAL + POLITICAL + ECONOMIC = 9

the chances for value congruence or agreement from which decisions are made. Both the Ranging and the Balancing actions combine to form the Valuation Process in the PTPM.

Following the flow of normative and systemic knowledge from the initial practice (Figure 1, #2), the information is filtered tnrough the Valuation Process of the Planning Section. Once the information has been examined and valuated, the PS elects either to research the practice for more normative or systemic information (Figure 1, #6), thus entering a research cycle, or to pass the filtered information on to the Decisioning Section (Figure 1, #7).

When the Decisioning Section receives the PS's valuated information, a process similar to the one which occurred in the PS takes place. Given information from the PS, along with the DS's a priori normative and systemic knowledge, the DS also valuates.

At this point the DS may request more normative and/or systemic information from the PS (Figure 1, #8), or it may make a Planning-Based Decision (Figure 1, #6a) affecting the practice under examination. Should the DS request more information about the practice, the PS will valuate the request as it would any other information it collects. This new valuation action produces either a new research cycle or the resubmission of the information to the DS in some altered form.

In the case of a Planning-Based Decision, the DS has, generally, two choices. On the one hand, the DS can elect to continue the practice in its current state (Figure 1, #9), thus reinforcing the practice, its history and its tradition. On the other hand, the DS can select or form an Altered Practice (Figure 1, #10). In either

case, the DS bases the decision for practice or altered practice upon the Valuation Process. This valuation mediates not only the different types of knowledge flowing from a practice, but it also mediates between the interactions of the Planning and Decisioning sections. Furthermore, on a grander scale, the Valuation Process serves as a pivotal mediation process between an initial practice and the final reinforced or altered practice.

The Practice-Theory-Practice Model can be used to strengthen the case study method. It provides the theoretical perspectives and foundations for the large amount of material collected in a study, and it provides the guide for studying higher education institutional change. As a catalyst for the inclusion of theoretical foundations, the PTPM requires the examination of historical-experiential, normative and systemic knowledge which surrounds a practice. It also requires the careful analysis of Research Decisions and Planning-Based Decisions made as they pertain to the practice. These knowledge and decision analyses produce the information necessary for the study of the interactions among the different types of knowledge, and between the actors and the knowledge from a practice. The PTPM establishes the Valuation Process as the mediation point for these actons. Thus, the PTPM provides a method not only for studying the components of an institutional change, but also for analyzing the component interactions which lead to reinforced or altered practice.

The application of the Practice-Theory-Practice Model as a guide for the study of institutional change can be either reconstructive or predictive.

In a reconstructive application, the events of a completed change process are reconstructed according to the PTPM in an attempt to identify the major Planning and Decisioning sections and their actions employed in the change. Through this application, the identification of utilized, underutilized and avoided steps in the change process provides clearer insight into and, thus, more useful explanations for the change outcomes.

In the predictive application of the PTPM, the Planning and Decisioning sections and actions are outlined in an effort to realize an orderly change process. The use of the PTPM in the predictive mode serves as a guide which promises to help foster a change process which protects the separate identities and roles of the Planning and Decisioning sections.

The movement from a practice to a reinforced or altered practice remains a rich field for institutional research. The Practice-Theory-Practice Model provides a theoretical outline of the change process. It also gives an enriched method for studying such changes. Through the reconstructive and predictive applications of the PTPM a clearer understanding of institutional change emerges.

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